ALCESTIS AND HERCULES IN THE CATACOMB OF VIA LATINA

BY

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A number of non-scriptural subjects are depicted in the fourth century catacomb of Via Latina. Philosophers grace the walls and ceiling of one section, and Ferrua, the excavator of the catacomb, has identified puzzling paintings in two burial alcoves as Tellus, a personification of the fruitful earth, and a medicine lesson. Yet it is only in the penultimate chamber, N, and the final chamber, O, that cult figures from the pagan world indubitably appear. The demi-god Hercules dominates cubiculum N, and in one panel appears clasping the arm of Minerva, while in the corridor leading to O Ceres and Proserpina stand guard. Since O, which was designed for a single burial, also contains scriptural scenes, and thus presumably had a Christian occupant, it is around the decorations of cubiculum N that controversy has centered.

All the figure paintings of cubiculum N depict scenes from the story of Alcestis and the labors of Hercules (figures 1-6). Both tales had been widely utilized in pagan funerary monuments. Why, in the predominantly Judeo-Christian decor of the catacomb of Via Latina, have Hercules and Alcestis intruded, following the story of Jonah in cubiculum M and preceding the raising of Lazarus in cubiculum O? The question, as defined in an article by Engemann treating the controversy, has centered on the religion of the occupants of chamber N—were they pagan or Christian? Ferrua supposed that an extended family commissioned the decorations of the final sequence of rooms in the catacomb, and that while some members of the family were Christian, others were pagan, and thus chose pagan themes to decorate their own burial chamber, N. Fink, on the other hand, argued that the messages of the Hercules and Alcestis paintings harmonized with the Judeo-Christian spirit of the other cubicula, and “educated Christians are here undoubtedly in evidence.”

These viewpoints, I believe, need not conflict, if we bear in mind that
the cubiculum gives evidence about at least two people, the patron who commissioned the decoration of chamber N, and the artist who executed the paintings. In this study I will attempt to distinguish the role of the patron from that of the painter, assigning to the patron the initial choice of pagan subjects, and to the painter the desire to align this material with Judeo-Christian artistic themes. This may suggest that the patron was pagan and the painter Christian, but I do not believe that certainty concerning the religious affiliation of either party is possible to attain. The patron tolerated the Judeo-Christian ambiance of the adjacent cubicula, while the painter did not consider pagan cult images an abomination.  

Within the cubiculum there is absolutely no evidence of Christian worship, but the appearance of Hercules need not indicate that he was the object of the patron’s devotion. Hercules, in my analysis, is present first because he resurrected Alcestis, and the patron wished to make a statement about the reunion of man and wife beyond death, and second because the painter found the theme of Hercules’ labors artistically fruitful. Hercules graces no other known Christian catacomb, but his presence here is hardly more discordant than that of Orpheus in Christian contexts. Both were demi-gods in origin, who like Christ had visited the land of the dead.

The paintings were executed in a period when paganism and Christianity sometimes clashed in the imperial court and the Roman senate house—the period of Julian’s apostasy and the first removal and restoration of the statue of Victory. The decorations of cubiculum N, however, tell us that in two areas, that of figure painting and of beliefs about the hereafter, the pagan and Christian traditions could open into each other just as the cubicula depicting Jonah, Hercules, and Christ raising Lazarus open into one another. There is certainly no evidence here for any syncretistic cult, but the separation in worship of Hercules and Christ did not preclude parallelism in funerary art or in hopes for the survival of the dead. Fourth century Romans could be ignorant neither of the deeds of Hercules nor of Christ. Neither patron nor painter may have received Christian baptism, yet both were at home in an increasingly Christianized world.

The decoration of the tomb chamber was chosen to celebrate the devotion of a wife to her spouse and to display the painter’s artistry, rather than to make a statement about the divinity, Christian or pagan. Rather than hypothesize about the religious affiliations of the